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DOUBLE IDENTITY

BY RAYMOND Z. GALLUN





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There was fear and bitterness, when three humans found themselves caught in an alien life-form's desperate bid for survival. But the greatest fear was of what other humans would do . . .

COME HELL and high water, the Verden brothers still had to drive into the village some time for supplies. It was in Kline's Grocery that Link Pelhof spotted Cliff Verden. Link was big and mean and dumb; and he had a pathological hatred for anything out of the ordinary. "What's the matter with your face?" he growled at Cliff.

Cliff Verden gulped in honest fear. So the trouble was beginning to show—even through flesh-coloured cosmetic paint. "Eczema," he said.

"Eczema don't look like that, Dopey," Pelhof growled back.

"Okay—call it what you want," Cliff snapped at the bigger youth sarcastically. "So I got leprosy."

In his heart he wished mightily that his, and his brother Jack's trouble was something simple and fairly familiar like leprosy.

Cliff got out to his jalopy with his bags of stuff as fast as he could, without drawing more unwelcome attention. He didn't have to tell his brother about the stares he'd got in Kline's. Jack started driving as if they were a couple of bank-robbers making a get-away.

"So folks are smellin' a rat," Jack snapped. "We can't make as if everything's normal much longer, Cliff."

"Guess not, Jack. But I still look more or less like me, don't I? Except for the thickening skin, which don't hurt, and which ain't disease. And the fuzz . . ."

"Sure you do, Cliff. Me, too, I guess, eh? Hell, though, I'm scared of looking at myself in mirrors. Got to get over that . . . Cliff, you know

what? I'm glad it's both of us. If it was just me alone, without any companionship, you could shoot me for a maniac."

"Bum!" Cliff snapped, almost grinning. "What a load that would be off my chest if it was only you! But it ain't just us, even. How about Mary Koven? She was out in the marsh, meteorite-hunting with us, that Saturday afternoon. Just six weeks and five days ago. What'll her folks think when they find out what's happening to her—and to us? Poor Mary! Poor me and you! . . ."

Cliff Verden was in love with pretty Mary Koven. At least she had been pretty—pale hair, blue eyes, a swell smile.

"Listen, Cliff," Jack urged again. "We've got to tell Doc Heyward . . ."

"That horse-quack? Nuts! If anybody told him what was the matter with us—and if he believed it—he'd drop dead from fright. We know ten times the science he does; and about this particular thing, I'll bet we know as much as the best big shot professors would ever find out—almost! . . ."

The two Verdens conversed in the slang of their region, as they drove on home, across the dreary, lonely countryside, that could have hidden many a mystery. They were a pair of young farm boys—orphans—and the tinkery kind, the reclusive kind. Maybe like the Wright Brothers. Their inaccurate grammar didn't match the magazines and the scientific reports they were accustomed to read—stuff that tried to keep pace with new developments toward a great dream, which was now just short of having

been realised: Space travel. Journeys to other worlds.

Almost every day the newspapers told something new: "White Sands probe-rocket ascends five thousand miles . . ." Or: "Franklin Gramm's specialists develop improved hydrogen-to-helium reaction-motor . . ." Or: "Cramm's unmanned space-ship circles moon. Photographs of hidden lunar hemisphere, brought back to Earth by robot craft, kept secret. Cramm silent but jubilant . . ."

Yet, that last item brought things up to date—as of yesterday's paper. It was the saga of young Frankie Cramm, heir to a food-products fortune. The fair-haired boy who gave up tennis, polo, and big-game hunting, for a larger sport . . .

"Cramm rhymes with damn," Jack Verden growled. "Still, maybe we ought to send him a telegram, or write him a letter. What is happening to us and to Mary, seems to be along his lines of purpose, though the means is a lot different . . ."

Cliff scowled. There was fine fuzz on his forehead — like the beginning of soft, grey fur. "Nuts," he said. Sometimes he wondered if his voice was really changing, too. Awful panic was rising in him; and that panic itself built more panic — because, to express it, his throat was trying to make some inhuman whine!

DESPERATION cowed him. "Yeah — I guess we'd better write that letter to Cramm, Jack," he said thinly. "Or even try to see him. If young Cramm investigates, at least our trouble will get a lot of publicity. It won't do us any good — we're past being helped. I guess we should have told long ago — instead of trying to make believe nothing was changed. Because it's not just us; everybody's in danger. And the danger, itself, is full of unknowns, Jack . . ."

The Verden brothers arrived home; around them spread the acres where they made their living, farming. But around the big, unpainted farmhouse, were the crude, glass-roofed sheds where, formerly, they'd spent much time experimenting with nursery stock,

trying to develop better fruits. That project was forgotten, now.

The inside of the house smelled as old houses smell. Jack Verden put coffee on the stove, for lunch. Cliff sat with tablet and pencil at the kitchen table, and tried writing notes for the letter to Cramm. His literary style was more elegant than his speech:

" . . . On Earth we think of space travel in terms of rocket ships . . . Seems as though some other-world science can accomplish it in another way . . . Biology . . . Something to do with basic vital force shaping — changing — the physical form of a plant or animal to match the form of another. At least that is my guess . . . Because I feel some outside dominance creeping into me . . . Another personality . . . No—not human . . . Especially at night . . . I suppose that's natural . . . Because one's ego goes to sleep, relaxes control over one's body—and somehow seems to wander to alien places itself . . .

"But to get down to facts . . . On the evening of September 18th, last, we saw a small meteor fall. Its light was red—showing that it was comparatively cool, and hence slow. It seemed to land in a marsh, nearby . . . So, the next day three of us went to look for it. It wasn't a meteor . . . Yes—we found it. In a little crater. Smashed. A mass of hooks and metal foil on its nose, kept it from burying itself deep in the ground . . . It was metal, all crumpled up. We made the mistake of touching it—of trying to lift it. It was very heavy. We didn't notice the tingling in our fingers till later. Some force came out of that metal, and into us. That the thing was broken didn't kill that force. We left the thing there . . . Weeks later we came back, after we knew that we were somehow changing. Life in the marsh was changing, too. We buried that lump of metal, thinking that it would help. It

had been, I think, something atomically propelled. A cylinder, maybe two feet long.

"Now matters are worse. I don't like to take off my clothes. I see how much I'm becoming—something else, to match some unknown pattern, slowly. The body aches, as bone-structure is altered. The shape and form of the skull—not even to mention the brain within. The shape and form of rib and leg-bones . . . And I wish I were skilful enough to make microscope slides of the flesh of my hands, to see how cell-structure must be changing . . . I suppose it's all reasonable enough, biologically. A familiar force—if you can call it that—has been isolated and directed. The same force which moulds a human baby, or a seedling plant, after the form of its ancestors. The same force which enables a salamander, losing a leg, to grow a new leg in the proper shape.

"And, likewise, my brain—our brains—must be changing, becoming adapted to another kind of identity . . . Sometimes it's a little like double vision—one side of which you can hardly describe. But it makes you sweat to think about it. And I know I walk in my sleep. But it's not really me. It's something else, exploring an unknown place—somewhat fearfully, I believe. In the morning I find the stove taken apart . . . Is it my hands that do that, or my brother's? Does it matter, since it's the same for both of us? And only the night before last, our small electric power plant, here at the farm, must have been partly disassembled. I know, because it was rather crudely put together again.

"How long will it be before those other entities take over what used to be our human bodies, completely? And I have a feeling that our identities will be going some place, too. I seem to remember it. Murky. Nowhere for a man to be. Some

disembodied pattern of ourselves is being sent somewhere, or drawn—by the cylinder we touched, and, or, by some force acting from far away. So—do you want to call what is happening space travel? The trading of forms and minds across spacial distance. Space is involved, for the place I've seen in my mind can't be on Earth."

CLIFF VERDEN threw down his pencil angrily; cold sweat streamed down his back—the droplets there finding their way past the little hills of the goosepimples that could still form in the cells of his skin that remained human. Writing the facts down in his own square hand—pointing them out to himself like that—brought him a panic the like of which no Earthly cause could have given.

Jack Verden, peering over Cliff's shoulder at the writing, was no better off. "I'll type the letter up on our old Oliver later, Cliff," he rasped. "But let's drop it now, for Lord's sake! Let's get out of this house for a while—so we don't go nuts! Go to the Marsh again to see what's happening . . ."

"Yeah—let's run," Cliff growled bitterly. "Run, run, run! As if we could get away! Maybe if we don't do it now, we'll never even get a chance to finish this letter!" He paused; his ragged sigh was a little like paper tearing. "Well—okay," he said wearily. "Running at least gives the relief of an illusion that escape is possible . . ."

A moment later he was on the phone. "Mary, honey—how is it?" he demanded.

"Bad, Cliff," she answered, her voice somehow blurred. "The folks at least know that something is terribly wrong with me. They had Doc Heyward here. Pop doesn't want me to leave the house . . ."

"Lotta good that'll do, honey . . . Jack and I are going for another look at the marsh. Meet us there, if you possibly can. We three have got to stick together, for whatever happens to us . . ."

Within an hour the Verden brothers and Mary Koven, having crossed fields afoot from their neighbouring farms, met in the dreary swamp. Cliff kissed Mary; but he hardly looked at her—what he saw was hard to take. All three stared in fascination around them. This was early November, and the scrub growths that remained normal and Earthly were, for the most part, bare of leaves. But some of them had changed; near the place where the metal thing from across space lay buried, stems and trunks had thickened and grown weirdly gnarled. Leaves were long and darkly green. The grass had ceased to be just grass; blades had widened, and grown hard as wood, and sharp as daggers. Trees had sprouted tendrils, that coiled and uncoiled visibly, under the lowering autumn sky . . .

"Even in the dead of winter, with snow and ice all around, this stuff would keep actively alive," Cliff Verden growled, as if he knew. "Hardy—generates its own heat, as warm-blooded anim.'s do. Conditioned—as to another, bleaker world."

The patch of recently fresh-turned soil, where the wreckage of the cylinder lay hidden, was now completely covered with what looked like bluish moss. Out on an open patch of water, a lumpy black thing appeared for a second, at the centre of widening ripples. It uttered a noise like the croaking of a gigantic frog, grown far beyond common limits. The creature might have been a frog, recently; but frog it was no longer. It was as if the spirit of another order of biology had intruded here, to shape Earthly fauna and flora by its own pattern, and by this process, to supplant it.

CLIFF'S dread sharpened. Had he come here only to be more sure of horror? Maybe the additional strain of it made his mind waver—made that sense of double-identity clearer again. He seemed to remember a tremendous pit, where cold vapours coiled. From the one viewpoint in him, that pit was terror that promised to engulf him; yet from the other viewpoint, it was a refuge that must be left behind, because this eerie Earth—this place of

danger to home—must be learned about, and dealt with, if possible. Earth, it was called—a strange grunt of a name. A planet of hideous, ambitious life.

Cliff stared at Jack's sweating face, and knew that Jack, too, was experiencing the same kind of phantasm. As for Mary, with her eyes shining huge with fear from above cheeks that were now rough and fuzzy, even under the heavy makeup she wore as a mask—well, could it be any different with her? Cliff put his arm around her protectingly.

"The string holding us to all we know will snap any time, now," Jack grated. "I'll bet we don't even make it back to the house . . ."

It was then that three figures appeared suddenly from behind a nearby clump of scrub pines. Men. To Cliff Verden there was a shock in this development—an embarrassment, a guilt, as if at having been caught doing things which can never be approved.

"What's goin' on here? What have you Verdens been up to? And what's happened to my Mary? You told Link Pelhof that you had leprosy. Cliff! By God!—you'd better not kid about things like that, Mister! . . ."

They stood in a row—big, stupid Link Pelhof; little, naive Doc Heyward; and massive Jake Koven in his checked blazer. He was Mary's father. The grey stubble on Jake's rocky chin, seemed to bristle far more than usual, and his knotty hands held a deer-rifle at ready. Cliff got the impression that Jake and his two companions were like a pack of Missouri hound dogs, bristling before a quarry as nameless to them, say, as a Bengal tiger loose in the woods.

Fear was their main emotion. Fear of the unknown, the extra-ordinary. It had been in Jake's trembling furious words. Yes, fear became fury by progression; it was buttressed by hate and prejudice against things far beyond understanding. And there it was transmuted into an animal urge to pounce, to strike, to bite and tear and kill, until a feeling of security was regained.

Cliff Verden's heart was in his throat. He and his companions were cornered quarry; he wanted to run, escape, avoid explanations that must make them all outcasts, fit only to be destroyed. But then his brother gave an inarticulate exclamation, and Mary beside them, uttered a cornered cry which entirely normal human vocal cords could never have duplicated. There was no denying the alien timbre of that cry; there was no lie that could allay suspicion as to its meaning. Defiance was all that was left to use.

"Okay," Cliff snarled. "Put down that rifle, Jake—you damn fool! You got us treed; well, we ain't possums! You want to know the truth about what's happened to us, eh? You're scared that your regular lives are being upset! Well—you're right! Glory, how right you are! So find out the facts for yourselves! Dig—there! But don't touch what you find! Then, even if you don't half understand what everything means, get in touch with Frankie Cramm! Do you hear what I say? Get in touch with him! Call it a matter of life and death—or whatever you like. He may be a stuffed shirt and a featherbrain; I don't know. But he's got experts behind him. Dough. The advantage of being known everywhere. So—that's all I've got to say. Goodbye!"

Clutching Mary Koven between them, the two Verdens ran across the soggy ground toward the nearby woods, taking advantage of the befuddled surprise on the part of Jake Koven, Doc Heyward, and Link Pelhof, with whom they knew there could be no compromise, and no real co-operation. Not any more so than between rabbit and wolf. And the question was; which was which? But this was more than the flight of terrified humans that have become outcasts; it was also the flight of alien entities, lost and harried on a strange planet.

For the duality—the double-view-point—was still more marked and frightening, now, in the retreating trio. They knew that by now they were not more than half Earthly; other minds than their own looked out of

their eyes, and drove their hurrying feet, fearing the abhorrence of the Earthly strangeness all around, yet defiant.

They stumbled on, deep into the forest.

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN they stopped at last, Jack Verden said drunkenly, blurredly, between gasps for breath: "We don't live in our house any more; we hide in the woods. We try to keep safe, try to learn about our strange environment. Our names ain't our own anymore. Mine is—"

Jack uttered an eerie, long drawn trill. A night-bird might have made it—not a man. Yet it was a name. In a terrestrial alphabet it could be represented dimly: "W" r-r-r-a-ah-hh . . .

Jack Verden, himself looked startled at the sound which had come so easily from his own throat. Then, as realisation clicked in the still-human part of his brain, his roughened cheeks blanched, and he stood there under a tree, quivering and speechless.

Mary Koven glanced upward: then with her arms held in a gesture of protection over her head, she crowded against Cliff's chest, and seemed to huddle away from the patch of murky sky. Now, for this brief moment, her sobs were completely those of an Earth-girl.

"Cliff," she choked. "You get to be afraid of the sky! Of what might be looking at you from out there where the stars and moon and planets are! Of what might come down from out there! The sky used to be safe! Certain things were impossible. But now that's not so, any more! We're caught, Cliff! By the moon-people, aren't they? Glory—it's the age we live in that's to blame. Nineteen-fifty-six. Rocket experiments . . . Trips to other worlds about to happen! Contact with Lord knows what, already made . . . Oh, Cliff—how can anybody learn to stand it? . . ."

He patted her shoulder. By a gigantic effort of will, he forced vagaries, that tried to congeal into reality, out of his consciousness—a vast, pit-like

valley; the idea of having a barrel chest and great eyes that could see the rich colours of ultra-violet and infra-red; and a thousand thoughts that were not his own. He, too, for the moment became almost completely Earthly, again.

His consciousness remained dream-like. Still, what Mary had just said started in him a flow of lucid understanding that explained present days in the light of history, giving them a very special place. He began to speak, slowly, and almost without slang, as if he read italicised words from a book. But perhaps it was only his own good sense talking: "Sure, Mary . . . For billions of years, since it was created, the Earth has been completely separate from other worlds. But now is the time when human science has advanced just far enough to end that isolation—destroy that encasing chrysalis.

These are the most terrible, crucial days, full of wonder and dread and danger, and a million questions. Worst and most wonderful is that man faces a complete unknown, full of fascination, curiosity, dread, mistrust, yet hope of harmony. Maybe he dreams of friends on other planets—but he doesn't know that they are there, or that he can even think very much like them. If there are enemies, they are of the worst kind—those who are hidden by the fact that even their existence can be in doubt—while their forms, their powers, their probable means of attack, are completely un-gaugeable . . . It's true that the three of us now know something about what we're up against—but does it help us much? And how green were we a few weeks ago—when it might have mattered? And how green, still, is the rest of the human race?

"Yep, these are the days of crossing a line, that something in our slow, primitive instinct for naturalness still calls impossible, dreads, revolts against, refuses to accept—though our intellects know that traffic between planets can be real. The refusal goes back to the fact that, through ages of conditioning down to our beginnings as amoebae, the sky was always an impassible limit. Everything beyond it

was a sort of dream—an ungraspable strangeness. It still is—at least partly.

"So here we are, poised on the brink of one of the most significant incidents of human history—contact across the line. And things look bad. We're elected for an honour . . . But can man ever really bridge the gulf of difference? Talk about tact, understanding—we'll need it, now! We can't hold on as we are, much longer. Easy, Mary . . ."

CLIFF VERDEN'S voice died away. He clung to Mary Koven as if his arms could shelter her, somehow. She almost managed to smile. Cliff's gaze wandered to his brother's still, pasty face. But Jack, too, had found some courage.

"So are the moon-people scared," he rasped. "Long ago they knew that the Earth was inhabited—by observing with telescopes, or something. We're as weird to them as they are to us. There are just a few hundred of them left. But they can guess that we number billions, by the way cities and stuff can be seen from the moon. They're afraid we'll come and overwhelm them. Sending scouts to earth was to try to know better what they're up against—and maybe how to fight back . . ."

Cliff understood how his brother knew all this, for it was the same with himself. That duality was the answer—that rapport of minds that had to happen when an alien life-force had half succeeded in usurping a human body, changing it to match an intruding ego.

From far off through the woods, Cliff heard the rough shouts of men. He thought he recognised Link Pelhof's heavy voice, turned gruffer with fear, and the excitement of the chase. But distance blurred the words. Now there came the frantic baying of hounds. Could they be half as frantic if they scented mere wolf in country that had been free of wolves for a lifetime?

Cliff half wished for human rescue, if it was possible—which it was not. But the puckering of his hide was not

just the effect of an invading thought, and the desire of another frightened being to escape being destroyed. For he, as a man, was also the quarry; he was linked with circumstances too different for those pursuers to trust. Their brutality was terror.

The familiar wood was becoming dreamlike around Cliff. Yet one thought was clear: Get to the brook Wade downstream. Throw the dogs off the scent.

His arms still sheltered Mary. But as the scene shifted with the shifting of his ego to a far place that had been dim in his mind before, she vanished from his grasp. There was no way to prevent that shifting. It was as certain as death; it engulfed him like quicksand. As it must be engulfing his brother, and Mary.

Then all philosophy, all determination to be courageous and cool, seemed without meaning; he was—there. Utter strangeness was as substantially real as the woods had been, minutes ago. He was prone. Stout metal bands confined him; crystal things gleamed near him. Apparatus. And the walls and roof, too, were crystal. He saw shifting colours that he had not had the eyes to see, as a man. There were layers of cold fog beyond the walls, and sluggishly writhing vegetation. Far off, yet titanically towering, was the mountain barrier—the sides of the Pit. His mind translated other measurements. Two hundred and fifty miles across, the Pit was, and a hundred deep—at the centre of the moon's hidden hemisphere. The vast dimple produced when the Earth's tidal attraction had pulled the lunar bulk out of shape. A vast cup to hold the moon's only air and water. An island for bizarre life, amid stark desolation.

Just knowing that he was really here, was a jolting shock to Cliff. Then he heard a twitter from beside him, saw great eyes with slitted pupils staring down at him. How could he know, and how could it matter, whether that stare was benign or hateful? Cold rough paws touched him. Shackled in a cave full of snakes, his terror could not have been as great. Cliff's shrieks were not his

own; he heard and felt the dry rustle of his great lungs, sucking in air too thin for human breathing. He saw the great, furry chest of the body that he now inhabited. Metal fabric clothed it, partly. His shrieking became a babble. He remembered that Mary and his brother must be in similar circumstances. Even his entrails seemed to writhe, but only for a moment. He was fairly rugged; but consciousness just faded away. Perhaps he had fainted.

HE knew no more, perhaps for days. The biological exchange of identities proved to be not yet quite complete; for he regained a dim awareness in his familiar woods. A light snow had fallen, but the body that had once been fully his, was by now too changed—its flesh too full of cells enured to harder conditions—for him to feel the cold. Crouching with him were the things that had been Jack and Mary.

Passively, as if they belonged to someone else, he watched the paws that had been his hands, arrange fine copper wire around a bit of metal, intricately cut from an ordinary tin can. His attention and curiosity were both dull, as if his emotions were still asleep.

But he felt the borrowed regret that it had not been possible to bring tools to Earth, by the method of transportation used—for tools were not alive. And other means—small rocket—had not been arranged for, because of the difficulties of damage by impact, and of finding such a missile after it had landed. It had been necessary to steal unfamiliar Earth tools, and such materials as could be found . . . Cliff had the borrowed memory of invading his own house at night, like a prowler. The tin-shears, screwdriver, pliers, and hammer, on the snowy ground now before his vision, were his. It was a weapon that his paws were trying to make—something for defence in danger.

Again he heard the ominous yelping of hounds. Then, like vapour, with no accompaniment of violent

emotion—or like a dying dream—the view dissolved. Perhaps he slept.

The next Cliff knew, an indefinite time later, was that he was back in—hell. Except for a soft artificial glow near at hand, darkness was all around; above, through crystal, icy stars blazed. This was the long lunar night.

His great ears picked up wild babbling and screaming from close by. Those ears themselves must have changed and intensified his perception of sounds. But certainly the voices must be altered and unrecognisable, too. They sounded like those of parrots gone mad.

"Cliff! . . . Cliff . . . Where are you, Cliff! . . ."

The timbre was unhuman, but the pronunciation was curiously accurate. It was as if alien vocal organs, here in the Pit, had a skill at mimicry far beyond that of men, and probably far beyond that of most of the intelligent beings—varying evolutionary forces denied that they would ever be human—that might, or might not, exist on other still mysterious spheres.

The first voice died away as if strangled; but perhaps it had been silenced only by the unconsciousness produced by shock and fear.

But a second voice yammered on: "Damn it—oh—damn! Cliff! . . . Mary! . . . Oh—gosh! If I woke up and found myself turned into a toad, it would be better . . ."

The words identified the raving as Jack's, though the voice was not Jack's, as it had been. Now, understandable speech gave way to babbling and yells, once more. But could loss of courage, here, when one's form was not even like one's own, be sneered at?

CLIFF VERDEN joined in the yelling. He knew that the voice that had blanked out had been Mary's. In parrot-like tones he shrilled her name, and Jack's name. He writhed and struggled against the hands that held him hopelessly pinioned. Near him, prone and restrained like himself, he saw two barrel-chested, furry figures that he must have missed before. One was still; the other battled uselessly

for freedom, as he, himself battled. Again Cliff heard his name called, and he looked into great eyes that now must be his brother's. Beneath them he saw white hair in wide-flaring nostrils. The face, if such it could be called, was pinched and small.

The Verdens engaged in no conversation that Cliff could have remembered later; their comments consisted of nothing but raving and curses. They struggled their way to the oblivion of exhaustion, but perhaps Cliff's reaction to strangeness was a little less wild than it had been during his first awareness of being here. Perhaps a dim inkling—born of basic courage—that circumstances might be endurable in this place, came to him, creating a thread of hope.

Before he blanked out, Cliff Verden again noticed the thing crouching in a corner. It was shaggier, more barrel-chested, more grotesque from an Earthly viewpoint, than even he and his brother had become. It did not move to touch them now; it only twittered faintly. Was the gleam in its huge intelligent orbs one of suspicious malice for all that was strange to it? Cliff wondered if such emotions were too terrestrial for a creature so different. But then, of course, suspicion was bound to the ancient law of self-preservation—which, because of the savage competitiveness of all life, must be universal.

Anyway, the glare Cliff gave back just then, was charged with hate for harm done him; for his helpless anguish; for all the eeriness that was around him. Hate . . . Again he seemed to cease being.

What bits of awareness he experienced, for a long time after that, were like scattered and disjointed fragments of nightmares. Sometimes he was here—perhaps being studied like an insect. But just as often, his vision and his hearing were back on Earth, with his usurped body, fleeing death with the company of two other shaggy forms. Once, near the end, on a wintry afternoon, when the sunshine made blue shadows on the snow in the woods, he heard the voices of many men from not far off.

One voice he recognised—Doc

Heyward's; explaining: "Link and I dug the cylinder up. I didn't touch it, except with the shovel. Link did—with his hands. Later we burned the metal thoroughly with an acetylene torch to kill whatever dangerous force was in it. Sorry, Mr. Cramm—it was necessary, though the thing would be interesting . . . How do we know, even now, that they won't send another? Or many? Or that they can't do to all of us what they did to the Verden brothers, and the daughter of Jake Koven. here? . . ."

Doc Heyward's excited tones could carry far, through the clear brittle air. So they'd really managed to tell Frankie Cramm in on this nameless trans-special threat and mystery! Cliff Verden felt a little relief, in spite of a distaste for the smooth adventurer.

He heard Cramm answer—with cocky sharpness: "Too bad, Friend. Should have wired me, first. Now we've lost important data. But never mind—I'll handle matters! Maybe we can take those creatures alive. That'll be swell . . ."

Cliff missed what followed immediately, as his mind blurred again. But later—not much later—he was in on the finale. His viewpoint was that of the hunted, shambling along before the long line of men that pushed their way abreast through the woods, while hounds yammered madly, and moonlight was white on the snow. There was no escape; no cleverness would work anymore, now. The enemy might fight; but the end of the rope had been reached.

And Cliff found himself not altogether glad, in spite of a threat to all people on Earth—one worse than that of lycanthropy. In spite of the stealing of his own form. For there were balancing forces and reasons; he was living the part of the quarry. Cliff knew that they had come to Earth because of fear and desire for defence and not for conquest—remembering this, now.

Yet, being a man, be understood, too, what drove the hunters on so savagely. As a small boy he had lain abed on winter nights, listening to the howling of the dogs in these same woods. Wolves were then the palest

of his imaginings. The cold chills along one's spine only tried to measure the extent of unnamed danger lurking in the darkness and the snow.

CHAPTER THREE

THE closing-in of the men was swift. They were dark shapes among the trees. The forms of Cliff's companions were grotesque blobs that kept in the shadows. Cliff was suddenly aware of the apparatus in his paws: Tin and wire and bits of glass; a weapon, improvised. It was not his own will that controlled those paws any more; but perhaps a little of his own wishes went with their movement, as they raised that crudely-made arm . . .

Link Pelhof snarled at him, showing his teeth: "I still know yuh by what's left of your clothes, Cliff Verden! If you are Cliff Verden at all, now! Damn yuh—maybe I'm goin' the same way—but it's your fault! Your fault, I say! But now you'll die! Die! . . ."

Pelhof's words were shrieks of rage, and fear, and unreason. He was a stupid lug, unable now to take the responsibility for his own past unwariness even after he had been warned.

Jake Koven's attitude was scarcely any better; his eyes glowed mad in the moonlight. There were honest tears in them—for Mary. But his grief and rage and terror, and will to destroy, remained speechless. Little Doc Heyward glared with silent fury.

But Frankie Cramm drew Cliff's greatest notice. His was big, blond and handsome, his hunter's costume was melodramatically slick. There was no question about his courage. He spoke now, and that was where the rub came; his diplomacy was of the crudest. He was one of those who call themselves sportsmen—but how often is that name a mere cloak of dignity and self-flattery for sadism?

"Easy," he crooned. "Easy, you damned things. Be good, and we won't hurt you! We know where you came from. My robot rocket, circling the moon, brought back pictures of the valley. Easy . . . Easy . . ."

His tone dripped honey and insincerity; his eyes glowed like savage

coals. His honest excuse, of course, was that he was afraid, and in deadly danger. But now, in this historic moment — this first meeting of the beings of two worlds, heretofore utterly separate and hidden from each other through all their ages of evolution — could any excuse at all be accepted? For this was the beginning of all interworld contact and traffic — not only for the moment hut for the future. The implications of this moment were too gigantic; the question of harmony or chaos, for ages to come, were balanced in it. In a larger sense, not just Earth and moon were involved; human dealings with the unknowns of Mars and Venus — and who could tell knew what other places were involved as well. Perhaps the problem of defeating chaos was beyond human powers; perhaps it called for the skill of a superman. Maybe harmony was impossible.

WITH the pucker of dread tightening the throat that had been his, the eyes through which Cliff Verden saw glared at Frankie Cramm. Cliff's private feeling was less contempt than regret. Here was the man who probably would be the Columbus of space-travel; he had the means, the leisure, the dare-devil nerve. But on the basis of getting along with unknown entities—the most important point of all—he was utterly inadequate. Crude, clumsy, thoughtless, egocentric. A fool. But the worst of it lay in the doubt whether any other Earthman would be much better.

Did the doubt presage general failure here? Even more on other worlds than the moon? Did it presage not only the futility of the great dream of interplanetary contact—of widened culture and horizons—but grotesque doom as well? Future war of the planets, fought with Lord knew what terrible weapons?

Cliff Verden thought of one other thing: the asteroid belt; the fragments of an exploded planet, theory once claimed. Correct or not, could this be taken as a symbol of inter-world traffic ending in conflict that actually destroyed one of the contesting spheres?

Cliff saw the weapon, in the paw that should have been his hand, lift farther as if to aim. Perhaps this menacing gesture was a glaring error on the lunar side of a difference.

"Get 'em!" Frankie Cramm snapped.

Into the sharp scrape of his order blended old Jake Koven's anguished yell: "Not—what used to be—my Mary! . . ." Jake rushed forward, hut his words ended in a gasp, as he ran right into a Winchester bullet that tore open his skull. . .

Many men fired together. For two seconds the winter woods echoed with the crash and snarl of slugs. Cliff Verden felt the body of his present viewpoint falling. His consciousness grew vague, but the picture of what was happening remained starkly vivid. The paw holding the weapon of tin and wire and glass, moved and tightened. The intended target was Cramm; hut the aim of a dying mind can easily be poor; the blue flash—probably atomic heat—missed its objective and tore off Link Pelhof's head and shoulders.

This was an insignificant part of action which lasted hut a few seconds more. In the air, mingling with the smell of burnt cordite, there was now the sharp tang of ozone. The dogs, awed almost to silence a moment ago, now went mad with yammering, and rushed forward in a savage wave. Cliff Verden still saw the flash of their fangs, and the hair bristling along their backs. The shouting of the men was of the same quality as the cries of the hounds. Fear and fury went together.

Then silence closed in, but Cliff no longer knew. Three alien forms lay in the trampled snow. The bodies still wore tattered Earthly clothes, from which peeped fur that the night-wind ruffled. Their great eyes stared balefully at the moon. Even in death it seemed that they were dangerous. They were children of the unknown; where their powers began or ended, one could not tell. For had they not been men, once; and had not flesh and mind changed slowly, until they were different? It was space travel by some warping of biological law. There was no way to know the truth—

now that they were forever dead.

The dogs whined and sniffed, as if puzzled and frustrated, now that the enemy moved no more. The men heaved uneasy sighs of relief at victory that meant uncertain peace of mind.

"Well—that's that!" Cramm growled grimly, as if to convince himself of a success, which somehow, too, in the depths of his mind, was a defeat—a serious one. He felt sheepish.

But then his cockiness came back. "Got to finish building my two spaceships as fast as I can," he said . . .

CLIFF Verden had no consciousness at all at that time; and it was the same with his brother, and Mary Koven. Nor was there any definite, clear moment of awakening for any of them. Perhaps they remained completely unaware, for days. Their emergence was like the emergence of the very sick from delirium—slow and mottled and confused, with blackness often closing in over their minds again.

But they were always in the moon valley, now; little by little the horror of their circumstances grew less, as they adjusted.

Once Mary said, in a birdlike voice: "We have just these lunar bodies, now. I saw the others die: I saw my dad die . . . You're here, too, aren't you. Cliff and Jack? . . ."

Thus conversation, and understanding of their position, began.

At an indefinite time later, during an interval of mutual wakefulness, Mary remarked: "We haven't been harmed, here . . . But that doesn't mean that they're our friends; they want to study us—T'chack and the others."

She said "T'chack" not as a human being would pronounce the name, but in its correct manner—more as a bird or squirrel chatters. T'chack was their guard, and doubtless a great scientist. The three from Earth, all had their clouded memories of him, his great eyes glowing from shagginess. He was grotesque, and yet, when you were used to his appearance, somehow graceful. Faintly feline—though he did not resemble a cat. The times he had bent over them, touching

them with cold paws, as a mother might caress her infant—or as a spider might turn a fly's head daintily in its mandibles. The times that he had applied strange instruments to their heads, or put sweetish, jelly-like foods into their mouths, as they lay clamped helpless to glassy slabs. The twittering sounds he made.

"He'll probably kill us when he gets around to it," Jack commented once, more calmly than usual. "But so what? We've seen everything."

"Maybe he won't kill us," Mary murmured. "Sometimes I know what he says; some lunarian words were left in our minds when we made the change. 'Tutoo' means something like 'good'. 'Luleel' is 'fear'. And he picked up our names, and a few English words—maybe from our raving, or by instruments, from our brains."

Mary's companions knew; their experience matched hers. Cliff thought how brave she was, to seem so hopeful. Especially hard on a pretty girl, this change of forms must be. But deep down she was Mary more than ever, and he loved her.

"T'chack!" she called at last. Good morning!"

The lunarian, who was busy, then, with a conical apparatus of crystal and metal nearby hardly moved. It was hard to fathom by what dark channels of reason he was prompted to reply in chirping English; "My name is T'chack; my name is T'chack; my name is T'chack." He was undoubtedly brilliant; yet, though these Earthians had crossed the path of lunar thought intimately, much of it was still an enigma. Part of T'chack's brain seemed to function like a phonograph record.

"We know a lot more about the moon people than just words of their language," Cliff said. "More than that was left in our minds by the change . . ." Jack and Mary knew that this was so.

IT was dawn on the hidden hemisphere of the moon, just then, through the crystal sides and top of the building in which they were imprisoned, the Earthlings could look all around them. High up on the wes-

tern wall of the valley, vast mirrors caught the first rays of the sun, and reflected them down on mists turned frigid during a night half a month long. Weird growths began to writhe contentedly in the warmth; ice would soon melt in irrigation ditches criss-crossing cultivated ground. There were scattered buildings, all obviously very old. And many a roof and eerie stone tower had fallen down.

"When you can relax, the scene can be beautiful here," Mary mused. "But it would be sad, even if we didn't know the history . . ."

Like babies only recently born, examining the wonders of life with their eyes, the Earthlings kept looking here and there; and history came to the fore in their thoughts. No other part of the moon had ever been habitable—only this two-hundred-and-fifty mile valley. The lunar race, incalculably older than man, was dying. Even in this pit-like valley, the atmosphere was vanishing. The last water was sinking to the now almost-cold heart of the moon. Advanced science does not admit that a world can age beyond being kept habitable artificially. But science can forget the forces of weariness and fear.

"There are just about three hundred lunarians left," Cliff said. "They've been scared of Earth for a long time, knowing that we've been getting smarter—knowing that none of their weapons would be any good against our numbers."

"Hey—are you goin' soft, Cliff?" Jack Verden demanded. "Take it easy—brother!"

Cliff Verden considered. Beyond the crystal walls of the building, looking in, were several moon-people, shaggy, forlorn, big-eyed, clad in what looked like coarse-knitted metal fabric. Cliff remembered that he was clamped down helplessly, and remembered all the terrible things that had happened to Mary, Jack and himself—by lunarian action.

"Perhaps you're right, Jack," he answered. "But we got little to lose, ourselves, by thinking with generosity—or not. And thinkin' like that keeps a guy optimistic. It's nice to know, in a way, that there are only a few

lunarians; makes 'em a lot less dangerous. But another thing reassures me more. Our present bodies belonged to real moon-people, once; but they're a lot more human now than T'chack's body, and seem to be getting more so all the time. It's the same, in an opposite way, to what happened to our own forms on Earth; you guess where the process ends. It's growth and change under a pattern contained in a controlled life-force. A man to a lunarian, or vice versa—body and brain, cell by cell. Until an ego can feel fully at home in its new and altered habitation. Maybe the force is the thing behind the genes that shape all living things at their beginnings. Who knows? Well, T'chack does. Anyway, the process is still going on in us. You can feel the aches of it . . ."

"Oh," Jack commented, his tone half dry, and half hopeful. "You mean we might be almost human again."

"Maybe," Cliff Verden answered at last. "That's optimism. But by being optimistic I was leading up to the question of what happens when what the lunarians are afraid of takes place—when Earthmen get here, at last. When Mr. Franklin Cramm gets here with his rockets and men. Which won't be long."

CLIFF paused, then continued raggedly: "Forget the lunarians; leave sympathy at home with the human race. Even so, when we were kids, Jack, we used to imagine us Earthians making friends across space . . . Well, we saw what happened, didn't we, when unknown meets unknown? Fear, fury, hate and murder! So, is space travel just no good for all time? Oh, don't blame it all on human nature; moon-people will kill, too. One time, they could win—on home ground. Then, on Earth, somebody'd get sore; then, when the rockets came in force—good-bye, Juggernaut."

"I'm cryin'," Jack commented dryly. "Hooray for those rocketships, and the men to set us poor prisoners free."

"If they happened to recognise us

as men," Cliff retorted. "Which they are liable not to—right now. So, what we need the optimism for is the one chance of being buffers between two letters X—for unknown and terrible. Nice job for the devil. Let's not waste time . . ."

"We start by talking to T'chack," Mary said.

"Sure," Cliff answered. "Hey, T'chack! Let us loose, Dammit—don't be a dope! Get this hardware off. You're scared; bet you know what an H-bomb can do. Yeah—all of a sudden we're hopeful enough to want to keep on living, ourselves. Maybe we can help you make things all right! . . ."

The lunarian turned, and approached with incredible liteness. Momentarily Cliff Verden's hope held. He had adjusted enough, now, to complete strangeness, to feel an inkling of its charm. An old dream of his brightened in his mind: (Part of it was fulfilled already, in this eerily-beautiful lunar valley.) To go far with the space fleets, Mars, Venus, Mercury. To make interplanetary contacts a success. To live the high romance of infinite frontiers.

But inevitable suspicion won a delay—against time to plan and prepare. The abhorrently graceful T'chack twittered one English word: "Dope." A paw pressed some control; Mary Koven and the Verden brothers; lost consciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR

At their next awakening, the Earthlings repeated their pleas, arguing endlessly. When the sun of the lunar noon blazed down into the valley, T'chack unclamped the metal bands that secured the prisoners. Mercy could scarcely have swayed him, and those others of his kind that he must have consulted; but desperation before danger was another thing. Still, he remained wary, a paw held a glinting weapon.

"That way!" he twittered, and the Earthlings tried legs that they had never walked on, before. They followed a path to a crystal dome. The heat of day was terrific. Tiny creatures, seen in the brilliant colour of ultra-violet, skipped here and there,

like grasshoppers. Great lunarian eyes of passers-by stared inscrutably at the captives.

Cliff Verden wondered if, in the faces of Mary and Jack, he now saw a slight resemblance to their former selves. A forming of features, a smoothing of skin under fading fuzz. But he felt his own great lungs—smaller than the lunarian norm—rasping dryly as they breathed air in whose rarity an untransformed Earthman would quickly suffocate; and he wondered how he had avoided madness in the change of forms, or how he could accept it almost casually, now. But he wondered also, if it was a means to a broadened understanding—of all the strange, unknown beings in the universe.

He put an arm around Mary. Yes, she still was Mary; yet their present lines made even this gesture of protection slightly grotesque and embarrassing. After a moment, he desisted.

Inside the crystal dome, which was weirdly and beautifully carved, T'chack showed the Earthlings the lunar version of a radio-receiver. It was a deceptively simple thing of crystal, shaped like a tuning-fork—with details of metal. But the fork vibrated—responding to the almost infinitely weakened waves that managed to find their way from terrestrial stations, to this far side of the moon. The voice of the news commentator seemed incongruous, here:

"I am grateful for air force cooperation in granting me the rank of colonel, and full authority and assistance in tereed swamp vegetation and animal life has been sampled, and transferred to biological museums. The remainder has been destroyed . . . On the danger side, it is known that the moon would make a fine firing-platform for action against the Earth, with guided atomic-missiles. It is hardly a comforting thought, in the light of the reported scientific powers of the moon people. As to developments in prospect, I quote from Franklin Cramm's statements:

"I am grateful for air force cooperation in granting me the rank of colonel, and full authority and assis-

tance in dealing promptly with deadly danger. From photographs obtained by my robot-rocket, I know where I must go. Another incident gives me an idea of the kind of devils I may expect to find. Their valley is large, but limited, and I do not believe that they can be numerous. And I go, fully equipped, and with a picked crew of air force men. Very soon. I thank all for the great honour that has been bestowed upon me . . .'

"Unquote. So the matter rests for the moment. Security reasons bar revealing Colonel Cramm's time of departure. But knowing his reputation, I am anticipating developments at any time. So, until five, pm . . ."

Martial music replaced the speaker's voice.

JACK VERDEN'S mood had changed. "It sounded like Cramm, all right," he said. Into his elfin tones had crept the shadow of a bitter growl.

"Yeah," Cliff commented. "But don't cuss him too much; maybe it sounded more like anybody and everybody back home, seeing a threatening mystery from the dark side."

There was quiet, then, for a few seconds, everyone exchanging tense glances all around. Cliff wondered if T'chack's great eyes were at once doubtful and pleading. Sympathy warmed in Cliff.

His gaze wandered around the chamber, hunting a means to avert calamity, that hung over this strange, beautiful valley like a malignant fate. But he mistrusted his own sympathy. Had he been so well treated here, after all? Were lunarians less blunt than terrestrials?

"But that's not it," he said aloud. "It all comes back to the same point—the getting away from the law of the jungle and of Genghis Khan for both sides, and the finding of understanding. That, past the terrible obstacle of instinctive fear of things so utterly different and separate. And to preserve, instead of destroying. To get along . . . There's art, science—Lord knows what, all—here . . ."

"Right," Mary put in. "Now for a way."

Cliff looked at the things which stood on a sort of table. There were two globes—models of Earth and its satellite. There was a model of what must be a telescope. The residual memories of the lunarian that had once ruled his present body, enabled Cliff to understand what was here. The great observatory was on the Earthward face of the moon. So was the point from which the small cylinder, that had enmeshed himself and his companions in a bizarre sequence, had been fired. Briefly he considered finding the means to go there—but he could discover no advantage in doing that.

Mary made the obvious suggestion: "If we had a radio-transmitter strong enough—we might talk to Cramm—put him straight."

At first blush, the idea looked good. Cliff turned to the creature called T'chack. "Hear that, T'chack?" he asked. Oddly, then, he found himself repeating the question in twittered syllables. With halting explanations.

"Transmitter we have," T'chack answered. "But—no good to use. 'Al-ready—they come. Too late . . . You not talk—to the ships . . ."

This did not entirely make sense, but Cliff's intuition for lunarian psychology suggested an explanation to him—the same hard barrier, built of mistrust for one whose soul was Earthly, though he might otherwise be a friend.

Laughter, bitter or otherwise, being a human reflex action, did not come naturally to Cliff's alien throat. But he did shrug. "No," he murmured, "I guess it would be too much to expect that T'chack and his people would let us do anything that might make us seem to be running things—even a little bit. Even when they're in a terrible jam. Nice— isn't it? Yeah . . . But, of course, we don't know that talking to Cramm would do any good, even if we had the chance. He's a bull-headed character . . ."

Cliff's words were mild, but defeat and frustration were in them. What was there left to do but wait, ride along, see just how the debacle happened? Like the clash of two sides, that had met once, very recently, in a

winter woods at night. Dread building unreason. Dread that chilled the flesh . . . Cliff Verden felt the tense impotence of a swimmer being swept out to sea by the tide. Already Cramm was in space; there was no reason to doubt T'chack's word, in this. In that airtight observatory on the other side of the moon, the watchers would know.

It was Jack Verden who now showed a minor defiance to circumstance. "We might as well go for a walk, gang," he said. "Gonna try to stop us, T'chack? . . ."

The latter only chirped worriedly, following. The Earthlings were almost casual, outwardly. They walked by a canal; they explored ruins where weathered carvings of odd charm were overgrown with vines as mobile as sluggish snakes. They watched moon-people prepare for trouble, mounting strange, glistening weapons, and studying the sky . . .

And at an unexpected moment, T'chack burst into song—at least that was what it seemed to be. The trills and warbles of it were eerie and sad and beautiful.

"It makes you think of stars," Mary said. "Of distance. And maybe of the end of the universe."

Cliff agreed. But though stymied, and perhaps living his last hours—as very likely the charm of this valley was, too—he didn't stop trying to plan . . .

There was no reason to return to the buildings where they had been. The Earthlings ate strange, hard fruit; and when, during that week-long afternoon, they grew tired, they slept in the shadow of a wall, and in sight of the encroaching desert.

But they were awake when the high, thin scream came; and they saw the dazzling streaks of fire high in the sky, as two rocket-ships, curving around the moon, braked metric speed. They did not come low, then. Flying like planes on short wings, high up toward the rim of that cup of air that was the valley. Ten miles up, maybe. Large though they were, they were mere silvery slivers in the sunlight.

Some lunarians nearby leaped to their weapon—a great globular knob mounted on a rod. They began a strange, soft chant, with whispers in it.

"I don't want to butt in, T'chack," Cliff Verden said. "But if you value anything at all, don't let them fire that rig. And hope that nobody fires—here, or up there . . . Come on—we'd better get back to the buildings . . ."

Cliff's spine chilled. The tension of each second was like a tight-drawn hair that might snap at any time. And was it so hard to visualise what was going on, up in those great rockets, which certainly had the most violent of hell-stuff in their bellies? Young guys, trained to hair-trigger living and duties, would be peering down with scopes, now, taking pictures, using radar—learning superficially about things that were worth lifetimes of study. Oh, they were good guys, and cool enough now—up there! They wouldn't drop anything that was like a fragment of the sun's heart—yet—not unless they were attacked, that is. But that was where the dreadful tight-rope-walk toward the hope of understanding began!

Jack Verden gave his views of his and his companions' position, here in the valley. "Any time, some of the local folk are liable to jump us and commit murder," he said. "Hm-m! We're the enemy within their gates." He glanced nervously at T'chack's slit-pupilled eyes.

At the place where the Earthlings had first looked on the moon through lunar eyes, the four waited, and watched the circling ships. T'chack was restive and inscrutable. To avoid some of the strain of dragging hours, with which little else could be done, Cliff Verden sporadically examined the apparatus of the life-forces that had brought him and his companions here; lunar memory enabled him to understand it a little better.

The radio, in the nearby dome, brought only music, and substantially the same newscasts as before. With nothing to be gained by listening, the Earthlings gave way to talking—to

T'chack, and to other moon-people who crowded around.

"Got to bear down on the propaganda," Cliff said. "But with plenty good reason. Don't start any trouble. For Lord's sake—don't! . . . But to vary the routine—T'chack—ever think about crossing space? To Earth, or farther? Ever think what it would be like, if the water of this valley were replenished? If fear was over? If there were more of your people? If they could flourish again? Or don't you dream? . . ."

The Earthlings slept in relays—on the ground. When the sun was near setting—when the light reflected from the great mirrors high on the eastern wall of the Pit, was already dimming slightly—one of the tiny silver needles that were the space ships, that had circled steadily for so long, propelled by subdued threads of atomic fire, darted westward, out of sight.

"The beginning of action, I'll bet," Cliff breathed. "That ship will probably be landing just outside the rim of the valley—to be fairly safe, and to be held in reserve, while the other one starts things. They must have been waiting for darkness. Dammit—do the toughest parts of this deal always have to happen at night?" Something in his mind chilled and quivered.

"You're nuts, Cliff," Jack protested. "No sensible Earth-guys would go stumbling around on the moon for the first time, in the dark!"

"Like hell they wouldn't!" Cliff answered. "Those guys are picked men Young; reckless; not scared of the devil. And they've been under training for trans-spacial stuff for a long time. No mere physical circumstances on a world as well known as the moon is by astronomical study, would stop them. Nope, that's not their weak point. If they think there's any advantage to the dark, they'll use it. They've got careful theory and plans to follow. They've got goggles with night-lenses, for sure. And black-light equipment. And all the other latest stuff . . . The weak-point is elsewhere . . ."

Slowly the daylight died; the valley filled with deepening blackness, over which the spacial stars burned. And from high in the sky came a faint

whisper. From beside Cliff, eyes glowed faintly, like cat's eyes. But it was Mary who spoke: "The ship's come down!"

It did not use its jets; it only seemed to glide in, quietly, on its wings, guided, perhaps, by radar. It showed no lights—except a dim glow from its hot jet-nozzles—which made Jack say: "That's not a real light—to human eyes, I'll bet—but infra-red, which is heat-radiation. The dopes—they don't know that our lunar eyes can see black light naturally."

"What help is that?" Cliff retorted. "With the moon-people seeing a target—well—that only makes the danger of a shooting-match worse."

The ship landed far out across the valley in the desert. The dimmest phosphorescence of the radiation of solar heat still left in the ground, marked its location—behind a screen of surrounding hills. That much shelter had been selected for it. Otherwise, you could call its being there fool-hardy, daring—which perhaps must take a part in a bout with the unknown, such as this.

But what of the consequences of bluff and bravado? That ship was an instrument of mankind's first brave lunge across the void; it carried a hope of good in the purpose. But certainly no cards could have been more stacked than now against such an outcome. Was it necessary, or even possible, to talk about it, with a dread-tightened throat? Cliff, Jack, and Mary all knew what should happen.

There'd be a blue bolt from a lunarian weapon; that ship would be torn open in a radioactive blaze. Then its twin would come from wherever it had landed, beyond the valley. Revenge, in a widening flame of millions of degrees, would be blunt and swift, enveloping the whole valley . . . Not a victory—but a precedent of defeat for a dream . . .

THE seconds fled, and that awful glare didn't come. But that must be sheerest luck—fear for once sharpening prudence, helping, no doubt. But how long could that last? Again by luck the time extended to several minutes. By then it was not too

hard to guess what might be going on out there in stygian gloom, where, through the swift loss of solar heat after sunset, there was no longer even the phosphorescence of black light, for natural lunar eyes to see, or specialised Earthly goggles to detect.

Two kinds of ghouls might be creeping toward each other. Human and lunar. To each, the other was a horror—a thing so strange and terrible that to hate and fear and fight it seemed the only possible course to follow. Emotional dynamite? What a feeble, archaic term!

Once there was a flash—from a black light projector. A great blue spark followed it back to its source. Doubtless an Earthman died. Immediately, at a little distance, there was the sharp flare of an atomic bullet. Most likely that ended at least one moon horror. There Earthlings, too, here, had refined atomic small-arms. New and terrible.

Cliff Verden was sure, then, that all was lost; now the storm would break. But once more—like the lucky turning of a wheel of fortune—nothing followed. What had happened was like the sputtering and dying of some ignited grains at the edge of a pile of gunpowder. Aside, Cliff wondered if the sweat of tension he felt on his body could be lunarian . . .

Carefully he had avoided turning his back to T'chack; for one never knew what he might do, under present circumstances. Now Cliff moved closer to his brother and Mary. "Get on the other side of T'chack," he whispered, "in case I can't talk good enough to convince him. We can't just stand here; luck'll never last . . ."

Then he spoke to the moon-creature. "For your own good as well as everybody's, you got to let us go," he said. "To save the valley, or lives, everything. Maybe we've got a chance . . ."

The other lunarians had all dispersed. T'chack's lungs wheezed nervously for a moment, as if in indecision. Maybe there was a little light around the hope of understanding between worlds when he chirped, "Go . . ." Or maybe he was just afraid.

The Earthlings hurried, stumbling

across bizarre country where even that self-warming vegetation was going into the sleep of deep freeze in the cold murk of the night. Dimly, by the starshine, they saw long crystals of hoar-frost forming on the ground. The metal-fabric garments the three wore, generated heat. But even half-lunar skin, with its dead-air cells, was bitten by such a temperature.

"We've got to peg as many of the large weapons of the moon-people as we can," Cliff said tensely. "Especially near the ship. It's the one chance to stop hell. Then, maybe we can talk sense into Cramm."

THIS, at least, proved easier than it seemed. In the darkness they looked like, and could sound like, moonfolk. Approaching a weapon's position, they would chirp a few syllables, allay suspicion, get close, and strike stunning blows with rocks. It was treachery for a good purpose—they hoped. There were more than two lunarians at a weapon, and passwords seemed unknown—or forgotten about—on the moon. A little action with the same rocks disabled delicate apparatus.

Three weapons were knocked out before they got close to the ship. But mostly they were on the way—running, leaping, stumbling—hurrying to win against time and danger. Their lungs, no longer of lunar size, gasped from the exertion. Nearing the ship, they began to circle and search the surrounding hills. Five more knob-like things they found, and put out of business, stunning the beings that manned them.

Cliff gave a low mewing call, more chilling, from an Earthly viewpoint, than a demon-cry. No lunarian voice answered it.

The Earthlings felt half frozen, but elated. "Gosh, I hardly believe it," Jack remarked. "But I guess we've done what we wanted—at least for a little while. The worst danger zone for trouble to start is quiet."

Cliff put an arm around Mary. There was no embarrassment now, to be found in awareness of their strange forms. Together, they felt like part of the night. They were adjusting to the

lunar environment. "Thanks for everything, Mary," he said.

But this lifting of their spirits was pathetically brief. For, from out of the dark, hard, metal-sheathed bodies rushed them. Their low twitters must have been heard, as well as Cliff's cry; and the night-lenses of goggles must have made the best use of the starshine, to enable the wearers to see them. It was no mild assault. The blows, countering a fear of death and horror, on the part of those who delivered them, could have killed easily.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE next thing that the Verdens and Mary Koven knew, they were dazzled by the white glare inside the ship. Clutching them were six young men in space armour. Instruments and white walls gleamed around them. And before the captives stood Frankie Cramm himself, resplendent in a spotless coverall.

"Well," he exclaimed at last. "A new type of local native! Smaller ears and eyes. Less furry. Almost human faces . . . Good work, boys. Hold them easily; mustn't frighten them any more than necessary . . ."

Cramm took slow steps forward. His eyes glowed at once with intense curiosity, and a savage and phony gentleness. His gaze seemed directed mostly at Cliff. "Easy, you poor things," he crooned. "Easy . . . Nobody's going to hurt you. As long as you know that I'm boss . . ."

Meanwhile, Cliff and his companions were studying the man. Cramm was a rather magnificent specimen—tall, well formed, strong; yet Cliff changed no previous opinion of him. Here was the would-be torchbearer of something great—space pioneering. Maybe his glaring fault, and his crudity before a chosen purpose, was more than a personal trait, but was something inherent in the rough drives of Earthly life. Depth was missing in him; even his cocky self-assurance had the excuse of being a thoughtless, unself-conscious thing. Yet he looked intelligent.

But that did not make him wise; however, it is almost impossible to be

wise before the utterly unknown. There the only substitute for wisdom is humility.

Cliff Verden could judge like this now, intellectually; but his emotions could not follow. He'd been through too much, so his fury raged at the man. Still, when he spoke, he kept his voice, which was losing some of its bird-like quality, calm.

"Thank's for being so nice, Cramm," he said. "What happens next? Do we set up a military base here in the valley?"

They were simple words, but coming so simply from a furry and still only quasi-human shape, gave them the power of black magic. Hard young faces of the men present blanched. For a second, before he recovered himself, Cramm's eyes fairly bugged. What he said then was such an obvious thing to say, that it was ludicrous: "You—speak—English!"

"Sure," Cliff Verden answered. "Cramm—I like the idea of rocketing to other unknown planets myself. In fact, when I was a kid in Missouri, I kind of loved the idea. Maybe I do, yet. But maybe designing and building the drive-jets that are successful, and navigating across the millions of miles, is the easiest part. Sometimes I wonder how the rest is done. Do you just barge in, against danger, and all the things that you can't possibly know beforehand, like a nineteenth century Admiral taking over some dumpy island in the name of his flag? It sounds screwy to me, Cramm—especially when there are 'natives,' Un-human ones, with a psychology far different from your own . . ."

CLIFF VERDEN felt the heavy stuffiness of the Earth air around him in the ship. Soon it might kill him and his companions; but for now he was able to talk and observe. Under the impact of a half-lunar thing speaking English with a familiar and mild sarcasm, Cramm's cheeks became whitened, he dewed with sweat.

"This is stupid," he mumbled. "Insane!"

Jack Verden took up the argument

at this point. "Sure," he said roughly. "Stupid—like the way you look, now, Frankie Boy! Insane—like the way things that happen on other worlds can seem. Okay—let's make matters easier for you: Want me to guess what your plans are? Yeah. Take over the valley; establish a base; begin running things. Like as if you knew every danger at a glance. Well, let me point out that we think we just saved your life—for a little while! And all of a sudden I get another idea. We're good American citizens from Missouri; we got here before you did. So, if there's any taking-over to be done, don't you think we got claim-priority over you? We should have homestead rights. So maybe we should contest intrusion in the Supreme Court, eh? Or even sue you for trespassing . . ."

The situation was so grotesque that it was almost funny; but nobody laughed.

Stung by insult, Frankie Cramm showed anger. It helped clear some of the fuddled confusion from his mind and face. "Oh—" he growled. "I get it. That night in the woods! You're the other side of the biological exchange. Lunarians into men—here!"

It was Mary Koven who answered this time. But her words seemed to hit the same mood as those of the Verden brothers, as if they were all one: "To the head of your class, Mr. Cramm! You handled that woods incident with nice, blunt efficiency! Bridge a gulf of difference with a gun—because you're scared! Because you let your nerves get the best of you, before the unknown! Assuming that you faced an enemy, before you even took the trouble to find out! Because anything so strange has to be an enemy, eh?"

"And you're the man who wants to be the first to visit the planets! Oh, boy — it's pathetic! No — it's gruesome! But don't get me wrong. I don't say that any other uninformed Earthman would have done any better than you — or even as well. But the unknown, on a strange world, just can't be simple. And a mistake could be horrible, involving the whole human race . . ."

As she spoke, Cliff Verden watched Mary. She was rather splendid. And, aside, he wondered if his ideas of beauty hadn't drawn something from lunar concepts. He remembered a revived movie he'd seen long ago. A woman made from a black panther; feminine beauty emerging from a sleek and dangerous ugliness, that still had always been beautiful. In Mary's still half-lunar form, did he now suddenly notice the same thing happening in her — without any abrupt physical change in the body itself?

Now Cliff's attention was drawn back to Cramm, who stood fuddled again before this last onslaught of words.

The clatter of an airlock valve jarred the spell. In a moment a young crewman in a space suit was reporting. "We have collected eight natives, all stunned, from beside their broken weapons, sir," he told Cramm. "We have them outside — shackled."

This news seemed to start Cramm's mind to working again. A light of grudging comprehension came into his eyes. "Thanks, Savrin," he growled. Then he turned back to the Verdens and Mary. "Also — thank you!" he grated. "For being of material assistance. But the arguments that have been brought up here, are pure, farcial nonsense! I had a job to do, and I did it the best way I knew how! I think danger is past. If they're wise, these lunar devils won't start anything. According to plan, by now our other ship has landed men with heavy weapons all around the rim of this valley, and commanding every part of it! And the ship, itself, is now patrolling overhead. And — yes — there will be a military base! We can't take any chances with treachery! Are you satisfied?"

CLIFF VERDEN, and his companions all felt the return of a pompous officiousness to Frankie Cramm. Cocky insistence on being always, perforce, right. Their hearts sank as they realised that Cramm had probably, by luck, established his dominance here.

The sequel was not hard to visualise: Other tough egocentric men with

imperialistic ideas would follow Cramm, here. By the science and the drives they brought, the valley might become truly verdant again. But the lunarians would either be forced into extinction, or practical slavery by the type of Earthling who never tried to understand that they, too, possessed culture, science, greatness, which they might have shared for mutual benefit, but which now might be turned by bitterness into a deadly, hidden danger.

Suddenly, in defeat, Cliff Verden wanted to hit that angry face before him. "No!" he said. "I'm not satisfied! We're all alive just by good fortune, which is not your fault, Cramm! This valley could be a smoking ruin—the last of a race gone, and with it a biological science that would certainly be useful in medicine on Earth—just for example! . . . But the moon is an easy place to grab, with only three hundred inhabitants. Look, everybody! Here's the guy who wants to go to Mars and Venus! The green-horn! I wonder what he thinks he'll find there? And what he will find there? There have always been signs on Mars; it's not dead like most of the moon. And we know that, with knowledge, life can go on even after a planet dies. What kind of life? How does anybody know? But something, certainly, to be handled with care . . ."

Cramm's jaw was hard with rage. "I hope you've said your piece," he snapped. "Because I'm going to put all three of you outside . . ."

It was then that it happened. There was a faint scraping and tapping at the airlock; then a mewling cry. Crewmen opened the lock cautiously, and seized the lunarian who had entered it. Tchack. He gasped and choked in the dense Earth-air, but his glazing eyes searched quickly around him. Maybe his motive was already revenge. He struggled. Then, with small, yellow teeth he bit the hands that held him, and lunged straight for Cramm whom he must have sensed was the leader. Cramm's faults did not include a tendency to run away; he grappled with the lightly built monster.

The Verdens and Mary saw the

tiny metal cylinder in Tchack's gloved paw. It touched Cramm's bare arm. There was even a tiny spark. Cramm recoiled slightly.

"You—learn," Tchack chirped in English. "I go—Earth. You change—lunarian . . ." Then he collapsed, half smothered.

But the meaning of what he had said was plain, not only to the three to whom this same thing had happened, but to Cramm as well. For on Earth he had heard how a process worked.

In that little piece of metal Tchack had concentrated a molding biological force—a driving pattern of his own shape. Now it had passed into Cramm's flesh. And into his own tissues Tchack must have let flow a similar though opposite kind of energy, to aid in the change and exchange between himself and the Earthian adventurer.

CLIFF VERDEN was almost sympathetic to Cramm's reaction to terrible knowledge; for he had been through this ordeal himself. In a matter like this, no courage was any shield from fear. To realise suddenly that you have been bitten by a cobra, can only be a feeble comparison. For here was slow, grinding horror, that warps limbs and bone and skin and muscle to a form where one can scarcely know himself.

Cramm's jaw dropped, and his cheeks seemed to cave in. "Damn—I'll kill you!" he growled at Tchack's inert figure.

"Don't!" Cliff snapped, protecting the lunarian with what was probably just a bluff—in one way or another. "He's the one that knows about this sort of thing—the only one who can turn the process back—if it can be done. Besides, what happened serves you right . . . Get us all out of here—outside where we can breathe—and where I can talk to Tchack . . ."

Under the pressure of events, Cliff and his companions had hardly realised how groggy the air in the ship was making them. But now, as they were hustled out into the stinging cold of a semi-vacuum, and shackled against the side of the ship, the blurry weak-

ness left them. But their lungs, in chests that had grown smaller than those of the lunarians, laboured heavily.

In a moment, all was quiet again. A guard in a space-suit paced back and forth, his form limned against the glittering stars. In a long row, against the flank of the ship, which, of course, was sealed and dark, were the other lunarian captives. Regaining consciousness after having been stunned, they had covered themselves with desert sand, as a protection against the cold. The Verdens and Mary—and T'chack, who had now also recovered his senses—did the same.

Now Cliff addressed T'chack, who lay between himself and Mary. "Can the process be reversed. T'chack—for Cramm?" he asked. "You know—can Earthling stay Earthling—not lunarian—after—" Cliff stopped, aiding his effort to make his question clear a moment later, with a few halting, musical syllables.

There was a long pause. Then T'chack said, "Yes."

"Good," Jack commented. "We've got Cramm in a nutcracker. We got something to sell him now, that he can't help but want—his own identity! He'll give up—come our way running!"

Right then Cliff was sure that this was right. So his thoughts wandered. "That apparatus—T'chack," he said. "Those slabs where we were fastened down. You're not on one. Don't you have to be—to change bodies?" Again he resorted to a few lunarian words to help out.

"Not—all—time," T'chack answered. "Not—first—part . . ."

Now Mary had a question, a feminine one: "T'chack," she began very slowly and carefully. "Will we—will Cliff, Jack, and I—Mary—really become Earth-people again—completely—in time? With the same—faces—that we had—on Earth? . . ."

Again there was an interval—an eerily tense one—before T'chack replied: "Yes—completely—almost—in time. A year—maybe. Bones—different. Many things—different. But flesh—change . . . Bones—change. Things—change. Faces. All . . ."

CLIFF VERDEN and the others felt drowsy. It was the cold that did it; they covered even their faces with sand, leaving only tiny spaces through which to breathe. It seemed that, in doing all this, they followed a lunar instinct. Their self-radiant clothing helped keep them warm in the awful chill. The sleep that was coming over them was probably like hibernation.

Cliff thought of the farm, of the green hills in the springtime. He yearned for Earth, to be back there, and to have Mary as his wife. But to retain so much of the old life was now an impulse that was obscured, too, by other yearnings. Far, far overhead, moments ago, he had glimpsed the tiny dart of radioactive fire from the jets of the circling space-ship. And now, with this memory, and with much of the tension of recent events quieting toward better solutions, his mind soared more vividly toward a boyhood dream. High romance across the void. The unfathomed mysteries of Mars and Venus. Danger. The infinite caution and judgment needed in handling enigma—which could never be a simple thing, that could be dealt with so bluntly as a human affair.

Oh, no! . . . But didn't that, of itself, mean a more magnificent destiny, not only for mankind, but for whatever other comparable forms of life that might come within their sphere of knowledge? The lunarians were not human—yet even their shapes might be far more human than the beings that might have to be understood, farther out. After all, by some parallel of evolution, the lunarians had arms, legs—and a skeleton and flesh comparable to the human. It might not be the same, elsewhere. But now, the shell of isolation of one world from all the others was breaking. It was like a strange, thrilling dawn. Adventurous. But maybe something splendid, instead of a debacle of confusion and horror . . .

Cliff Verden's awareness slipped away from him. He awoke to a noise and bustle and dazzling daylight—which of itself was a surprise, meaning that his sleep of hibernation had

lasted for all of two Earth-weeks! But that was not all of the surprise.

Cliff stumbled erect out of his bed of sand. Near him were Mary and Jack. Instantly Cliff's thoughts leapt into the groove of a previous hope that had seemed almost a certainty. "Cramm—," he gasped. "What happened? Didn't he come—to ask if his body could be kept from—changing? Didn't he come—not in two weeks? . . ."

There was worry in Cliff Verden's voice, and in the faces of his companions . . .

"We don't know—anything," Mary stammered. "Cliff—what can it ever mean? . . ."

Space-armoured crewmen, who had already freed Mary and Cliff from their shackles, were doing the same for the captive lunarians, most of whom burst from their sleep to hurry away, twittering, still gripped by horror of the strange intruders from Earth.

Cliff was about to make inquiries of one of the crewmen, when another man stepped toward him. It was Frankie Cramm. His face, inside the transparent bubble of thin plastic, that was his oxygen helmet, looked terribly haggard. And already the skin of his cheeks seemed slightly odd. And the marks of worry were deep around his eyes. He must have had some tremendous battle with himself.

Now he spoke, his voice coming, thin and muffled, through his helmet. "I heard what you just said," he growled at Cliff. "One thing you don't seem to realise is that I really like the idea of making a success of interplanetary contacts, too. Well—I know what you meant, when last we talked. All right, damn you—maybe I've gained some humbleness and insight since! As maybe you did, yourself, not so long ago! By the change you've been through! Well, if that kind of a change—giving two viewpoints—is the key to a better insight, I guess I can stand it, and keep my sanity, as well as you can! No—I didn't come to find out if the change could be stopped. You see, I'm not going to have it stopped!"

Cramm's tone was defiant, his square jaw hard. And Cliff Verden and his companions, in their surprise, realised what they had sometimes sensed before. Frankie Cramm had been crude, blundering, untaught; but under all that there had been strength, potentials, and a savage will to realise to the best of his ability, the dream that was his, too.

"Good. I admire you—honestly," Cliff said. "My apologies wherever necessary. What now?"

There was still a coldness between them.

"Whatever you advise—if I think it reasonable myself," Cramm answered. "No military hase here, and my ships will leave as soon as possible. To show good faith. The rest—well—what do you think? We could leave certain Earthly products behind, for the lunarians to examine. Maybe, in return they would give us examples of their inventions, art-work, and so on. All right?"

"It sounds very reasonable," Cliff replied. "We'll see." But deep down he felt humble and a little errant, himself.

"Do you want to come back to Earth with us?" Cramm demanded.

Cliff Verden looked at his brother, and at Mary. It was a hard question to answer abruptly.

"Maybe we'd better stay here," Mary said. "We're not so very Earthly—yet. Though I guess we could disguise ourselves a little. But, for the time being we'd better stay—be ambassadors of good will. Okay, boys?"

Cliff and Jack both nodded.

"Thanks," Cramm said. "Work out the details you like, and let me know." He paused for only a moment more to exchange fascinated stares with T'chack, who had stood quietly near, abhorrent and shaggy. Then Cramm turned on his heel, and re-entered the ship.

"Everything's fine for your people, T'chack," Jack Verden said. "Tell 'em they can stop being afraid of Earth. Tell 'em that Earthians are their friends . . . Only, I'm worried about you; maybe you want to back

out from going to Earth, now that the revenge motive is gone. Maybe you won't like being half Earthling for a while."

This time T'chack grasped the general meaning of the English words without difficulty. His eyes glowed. Maybe it was the questing eagerness of the scientist. "Not—back—out," he trilled.

The four started across the valley toward the lunar buildings. During the next few hours, much happened. Young men took many pictures of lunarians and their way of life. The strange became more familiar, from two viewpoints; barter began. A cigarette lighter might be traded for a weirdly tooled ornament of black enamel, or a bit of radiant fabric.

Among the lunarians, sullenness gave way to a strange excitement, which might mean a renaissance among them, in time to come. Did they also have a sense of wonder? Did it kindle in them a spark that might prompt them to use their science to rejuvenate and repeople their valley?

CLIFF talked a second time with Cramm. As a result, two young Earthmen, a physician and a biologist, decided to remain on the moon, to conduct studies. Supplies for them, and a special, airtight space-tent, were unloaded from the ship. Also, three space suits, for the time, not too far off, when Mary Koven and the Verdens, becoming more and more Earthly, could no longer breathe the thin atmosphere of the lunar valley.

Also, Mary and Cliff had a private talk. Mary answered Cliff's question with the hint of the smile that had been hers before they had ever tangled with moon-mysteries. Her brows were shaping. Her eyes were turning from yellow to blue, again. And there was short blond hair, with a suggestion of a wave, on her head, showing amid fading alien fuzz. He thought, again, of that old movie—the black panther becoming a pretty girl.

"I don't see why we should wait

until we are completely human, either, Cliff," she said softly. "Or until we go back to Earth. Will we ever be more sure? As a ship captain, Cramm has certain official powers."

And so they were married, aboard the Cramm's number one rocket.

The other space ship had landed beside its twin. After the wedding T'chack disappeared—to go lie on the same slab on which Cliff Verden had first awakened. Thus he prepared for strange adventure.

But Mary and Jack and Cliff were present to see the airlocks of the space ships sealed for the last time, before their leap back into the sky.

"Good luck. We'll see you. Thanks for everything," Cliff said to Cramm. He put his arm around Mary.

For once Cramm smiled at them. Was it mostly for his view of these still-strange figures showing affection, or for his own grim thought of how he would come back to the moon, and see them?"

"Yes," he said. "And in a couple of years, maybe we'll go farther—see the Martians wearing red neckties in the thin desert wind."

"Sure," Cliff joshed back. "I'll bet. Red neckties."

"How'll we know how to get along with them, then?"

Dread plucked at Cliff—like that of a nameless noise in a blizzard at night. In the impulse of man to cross space he saw the dangers of complete mystery. Yet he felt a vast eagerness—and the belief that, in Franklin Cramm, human chances for great achievement were as good as they could be.

"Search me," Cliff said. His tone expressed caution, shrewdness, a willingness to be flexible, and a humble wonder before the universe.

"Yeah," Cramm grunted, staring out across that beautiful, eerie valley on the far side of the moon. And far beyond it. "I guess that that's the only answer."

FISHERS OF MEN

By HAL ANNAS

"We're stronger than men in some ways," Jean Lee told Cyleen, "we have more endurance in the long run. But we can't face death and deadly danger alone, the way they can." It didn't make sense to Cyleen until she found herself alone as no other woman had ever been . . .

CYLEEN MOXBY caught her breath, pressed her tall, stately figure against the bulkhead. She had never before seen Holby Gradwell looking as though he had just taken one in the solar-plexis, and she had been with the troupe a year Earth-time, come November.

Gradwell staggered past her blindly; pudgy jaw slack, narrow shoulders hunched forward. Even his paunch seemed to have shrunken and slipped an inch lower; his face was ghastly.

Cyleen stared after him, blue eyes worried, smooth brow trying to crinkle. She brushed a wisp of blond hair back from her eyes, swung about on high heels which made her nearly six feet tall, and hurried to the lounge.

Except for Jean Lee Misha the lounge was vacant. Jean Lee looked puzzled but not worried. She was alternately sipping from a glass, puffing on a cigarette and blowing smoke-rings. She rolled her black eyes from the direction of the port, looked at Cyleen.

"What's up?" Cyleen asked huskily. "Gradwell sick?"

Jean Lee sat forward in the plush chair. "How do I know?" She lifted plump shoulders and let them fall. "If he is, every male aboard ship is sick."

"Space-sickness?"

Jean Lee frowned. "No, dearie. We're not hopping about the cosmos with a bunch of jive-jerries who get butterfly bellies every time we alter course. You know better than that."

"Then what?"

"Look, honey; men get upset about things that don't bother us. We're tougher than men, but they don't know it. If they think something is wrong, they're not going to tell us;

they don't want to frighten us. They've got some deep-rooted instinct which makes them want to protect you and me and every female aboard. It's just the way men are. And take it from me, honey, you'd better go along with the idea. If men didn't feel that way about women, we wouldn't be worth a snap of my fingers."

"But I don't understand," Cyleen persisted. "Gradwell almost walked over me. He looked stunned; I don't think he even saw me."

Jean Lee shrugged. "Go ask your Jack Roland. Maybe you can make him talk."

Colour rose in Cyleen's pale cheeks. "You know he isn't my Jack Roland."

"You're crazy about the big brute."

"I admire him. So does every other girl in the troupe. And the men, too. Who wouldn't? He's got everything."

"Except money," Jean Lee corrected.

Cyleen bristled. "If he had money to carry on his experiments, he wouldn't be with this troupe. He's not a natural actor; he's a scientist."

Jean Lee smirked. "You said it, sister; he isn't an actor at all. He just can't make believe. If he wasn't so big and handsome he wouldn't be with the troupe."

Cyleen turned away. She found Jack Roland in the chartroom.

"Jack," she said, "what's up?"

He turned slowly, lines showing in his strong features. "Nothing much," he said. "Everything's going to be all right."

"Jack!" Cyleen studied what she could see of his brown eyes behind half-closed lids. "Jack, what is it? You frighten me. I've never seen you

look like this before. You look—I describe it—older, worried or something."

"Indigestion, maybe," he said evenly. "Don't worry about it."

"Mr. Gradwell, and now you." Cyleen's cheeks twitched. "Jack, you never pretend, and I've never known you to lie; tell me what you men are keeping from us."

Roland leaned against the table. "This thing isn't for girls," he said. "You let us work it out. And the less you bother us the more chance we'll have."

"But Jack, can't you tell me? Maybe I could help!"

Roland's full lips clamped tight, and his eyes blinked impatiently. "Please don't ask any more questions," he said, and turned back to the charts.

CYLEEN drew back, swallowed. She turned slowly, glanced back once. She caught a glimpse of Benson, chief pilot, staggering along the passage. She hurried after him.

"Mr. Benson," she said, clutching his arm, "what's happened?"

Benson shrugged her off. "I've got a wife aboard," he said bitterly; "she's all the pestering I can stand. If you girls in the troupe don't lay off me, I'm going to complain to the captain and get you confined to quarters."

"Has something gone wrong with the engines?" Cynee persisted.

"No. Nothing has gone wrong with the ship. And we don't call them engines; we call them reactors. All you girls have been around enough to know what the score is on a spaceship. Be your age; let me alone."

"Are we off-course, or anything?"

"No, we're not off-course. We're on it, and it looks as though we're going to stay on it—maybe forever."

"Huh? You mean, we're in a warp or something, and just going right on and on through space?"

"No!" Benson said sharply. "We're not in a warp. If you'll go up to the observatory you can switch on the telescope and see our destination less than a quarter parsec away."

"Then we'll soon be there?"

"We will not. Uh, excuse me . . . I'm not supposed to tell you that. Don't mention it to the captain, please."

"Of course not. But what's happened?"

"Why don't you go and stay with the other girls?" Benson reasoned. "Some of them are fixing things for a party, I understand. Why don't you go and help?"

"But I've got to know what it's all about," Cyleen insisted. "I'm frightened. Something terrible must have happened, or you men wouldn't be like this."

Benson placed a hand on her shoulder. "Don't spread any talk like that among the women," he warned. "We've got enough trouble now."

"But what can it possibly be? If the ship is all right and we're moving all right, and—"

"We aren't."

"You mean, we've stopped?"

Benson shrugged. "Promise you won't ask any more questions, and I'll answer that."

"I won't ask any more right now."

"All right. Everything indicates that we're moving at three-quarter speed, but we're not getting any nearer to our destination, and we're not getting any farther away from the stars behind us."

"Then the stars and planets are moving with us?"

"No. They are not moving different from what they ordinarily do. But we are moving fast, and we're not getting anywhere."

"What happens when you try to go the other way?"

Benson frowned. "You promised you wouldn't ask any more questions."

"I'm sorry."

"That's all right. The fact is, we have stopped and reversed and turned. We still don't get anywhere."

"But if that's all it is," Cyleen said sweetly, "I'm sure you men will figure it out in no time at all. I don't see what everybody is so worried about."

Benson nodded. "If that was all, we

would already have figured it." He strode away, called back over his shoulder: "Don't start any wild talk among the women. Nothing is going to happen to you as long as men are alive in the ship to prevent it."

Cyleen was pondering this when Jean Lee came up behind her. "So he gave you that story about being stalled in space, did he?"

Cyleen eyed the shorter girl. "He's telling the truth, of course; but there's something worse, much worse."

Jean Lee nodded. "Of course. But honey, you're not helping the men by nagging for information. Take it from an old trouser who remembers the first skyman to get out beyond the orbit of Mars: something big and pretty-frightful has happened. The men are working themselves to death trying to figure some way to get us women out of whatever it is. They don't expect to come out of it alive themselves. I know men, honey, and I'm telling you this because I want you to let them alone."

"But why couldn't they tell us and let us share it?"

"Look honey!" Jean Lee linked an arm through Cyleen's and led her to a rightangle passage with a port at the end of it. "One time back on Earth I left the stage for a while. I married and had a daughter. My husband was an adventurous man, but he settled down on my account, and made only an occasional trip to Venus or Mars. We made a lot of short hops around the surface of Earth."

JEAN LEE paused dreamily. Cyleen waited, watched the dreamy look change to one of pain.

"One day we had an accident," Jean Lee went on. "Just my husband, my daughter, and I in the ship. It was an atmosphere-craft and something fouled one wing; it went out of control. My husband got my daughter and I into parachute harness, actually threw us out of the ship. Then I remembered there had not been but two parachutes aboard to begin with. My husband knew. He knew it when he strapped the harness on us."

Jean Lee hesitated, blew her nose, wiped her eyes.

"When we got down," she added, "and I got to the wreck, there were men all around it. They tried to keep me back. They didn't know I just had to see Arthur one more time; they did know what the sight would do to me. They must have known somehow that, in the future, I would wake night after night screaming at the sight of Arthur all twisted and broken, his insides torn out."

Cyleen experienced momentary dizziness.

"I'm sorry, honey. You're pale as a ghost; I thought you could take it better than that. Anyway, you see what I'm trying to make you understand. If those men had had their way, I'd gone on seeing Arthur alive and strong and brave, and so determined and positive in his last effort as he flung us from the ship. You understand?"

Cyleen nodded weakly.

"So if these men here won't tell you something," Jean Lee said, "it's probably something you can't take any better than I took seeing Arthur all broken. The best thing for every woman aboard is to have a lot of understanding, to be patient, and do everything in their power to help the men any way they can."

"And just a little while ago you were telling me how tough we women are," Cyleen argued; "you said we were tougher than men."

"We are in the long run," Jean Lee reasoned; "we have more endurance. But when I saw Arthur last I went into hysteria. Men are different."

"I know, but I don't understand."

"It's this way, Cyleen: men don't mind danger to themselves. They face it and get a thrill out of it. But there is something deeply ingrained, maybe an instinct to keep the race alive, that makes them want to shelter women from danger."

"Not all men. Some are brutes."

"You are thinking of some of those you see across the footlights — the playboys, the irresponsible, the immature—and you're thinking of the

situations that develop in lovenests, in drinking-bouts, and in the more sordid side of life. You're not thinking about real men at their best. Honey, don't ever underestimate real men."

"But couldn't we do something?"

"Yes. We could take some coffee round. I imagine your Jack Roland would like a cup, maybe with a touch of brandy in it."

"He drinks scotch when he drinks," Cyleen said quickly.

Jean Lee smiled. "Know all about him, don't you? Well, take him some scotch."

Cyleen felt self-conscious about carrying a drink to the chart-room, especially for someone else. It would have seemed natural, she knew, to carry her own drink there and then offer to share it with anyone present. She slowed her steps as she approached the entrance.

The voice of Jamill, astrogator, reached her ears: "It's so confined, sir, it can't be but one thing."

Cyleen paused.

"And that?" It was the captain's deep voice.

"They are rolling a small segment of space, sir." It was the astrogator again. "We alter our course; the roll changes with us. We use full grav-compen and try to reverse our flight; the grain of the roll reverses. It's just like being inside a hollow sphere which is floating free—or maybe a better illustration would be a treadmill. Everything to indicate we're moving, but we don't move."

"Could it be a hole in space?" This was the second pilot's voice.

"No." It was the deep voice of the captain. "Reactors would push us through a hole. Jamill's got the right idea. Besides, we know the thing is controlled; we've already received an ultimatum."

GRADWELL appeared at the distant end of the corridor. With a sense of guilt, Cyleen stepped quickly to the entrance, entered. There was a sudden hush. Cyleen felt both confused and ashamed; she hurried to the side of Jack Roland.

"Thought you might like a drink,"

she said without looking directly into his eyes. She pressed the glass into his hand. "Excuse me. I—I've got to be going." Cyleen hurried out, pressed a hand to her heart, leaned against the bulkhead.

"They're beginning to suspect the truth," Roland's voice reached her ears. "If it wasn't for the women, I'd say to hell with their ultimatum."

"And every man aboard would back you up," said the astrogator.

Cyleen glanced along the corridor. Gradwell was no longer in sight. She remained where she was, breathing deeply.

"How much time left?" asked the second pilot.

"Three hours," said the captain. "And it's a hard decision to make. I've never been faced with anything like this before. If it were not for the women aboard, there wouldn't even be a question in my mind; I'd tell them to come and get us."

"Are you issuing arms?" Jack Roland asked.

"No point in it," the captain said, "unless we try to fight. And what are you going to fight? What's outside?"

"You've already had a demonstration of what they can do?"

"Yes. Beaney Skimpton. Poor fella! We can't knock him out with morphine or any of the stronger drugs. Nothing takes effect. We'll have to kill him; there's nothing else to do. I've got him in a soundproofed cabin. Two men are with him. I change them every hour; his screams and cries and pleading would drive everybody aboard insane."

"It makes my flesh crawl," said the astrogator. "I haven't been able to eat anything since it happened."

Cyleen felt that she was going to faint. Her knees trembled, tried to give under her. But something surged up from the depths of her being and seemed to whisper to her common-sense: Don't collapse here. Don't put an added burden on the men when they have tried so hard to shield you. Don't hamper them in what they have to do. Don't fall here in the corridor where they will find you at the very moment when they are faced with a

decision that in itself would stagger the mind of the sanest person alive.

Cyleen moved drunkenly along the corridor, found her own cabin, collapsed on the bed. Afterward she could not clearly remember traversing the distance. She found no solace here. It seemed horrible to be all alone with thoughts of Beaney Skimpton, communications officer, who was somewhere aboard ship begging for death.

Cyleen thought of Beaney Skimpton's wife, plump and jolly, the very antithesis of the tall, lean, serious man himself. Cyleen leaped up, sprang to the door, hesitated. She took a moment to repair the damage to her face, then hurried toward the Skimpton cabin. As she passed the lounge she heard voices, looked in. Netta Skimpton stood there, her jolly but quiet laughter a trifle more enthusiastic than that of the troupers.

For an instant Cyleen was revolted, but for an instant only. Then she understood quite clearly why the men shielded the women. Netta Skimpton would never really learn what had happened to her husband. It was best that way; there was no use for her to have to wake night after night screaming.

Cyleen felt closer to an understanding of men than she had ever experienced before. They had been just males, sometimes coarse and vulgar; sometimes merely callous; oftentimes gay and chivalrous and a little awe-inspiring in the way they accepted the world, the planets, the universe as their own mess of oysters. They were demanding, egoistical and had 10,000 foibles; but in the final analysis there was something fine and noble about them.

CYLEEN started up to the observatory, halted on the circular ramp.

Face to the rounded bulkhead, handkerchief stuffed in her mouth, was Jean Lee sobbing quietly. From the opening to the observatory came the sound of tense masculine voices: "Gradwell won't go along with casting lots. Won't think of allowing one of his troupers— Says he's old and has

had a good life. Says he's going to do the job himself."

"Did the captain agree?"

"No. Neither did Jack Roland."

Cyleen held her breath.

"Roland's got some idea up his sleeve. He's sweating it out with the captain and the astrogator now. They've found a way to lick the roll, but it takes time. At least they think they've got the answer. It takes into consideration the theory that space is the reality and matter is a fault in it, a rumple. It's too deep for me, but Roland's up on that stuff. Claims it is not another dimension, but another perception. I don't know just what it is, but he says we perceive things five ways. He claims there is a multiple of this which will perceive space as the equivalent of a tangible. Somehow we've got to find a multiple for our senses, but how? And who could do it in the time we've got? I think he's sweating his brain out for nothing. I think we ought to try to fight."

"Fight what?"

"We've got to do something. We'll go mad like this. We ought at least to heat those launching tubes and loosen the plates, so we can turn the stuff back into the ship if worst comes to worst."

"You mean, burn ourselves up?"

"It's preferable to becoming like Beaney Skimpton."

Cyleen may have drawn a quick breath, made a sudden movement, or it may have been the hammering of her heart which made known her presence to the older woman. She was never to learn. She stood there tensely holding her breath while Jean Lee deliberately, and with effort, brought her sobbing under control. Her shoulders stopped quivering, her head lifted, one hand moved quickly to her eyes, dabbing with the handkerchief; then she turned and her tear-streaked face was smiling exactly as she smiled across the footlights. "Oh! It's you, honey! Come. We've got to get out of here."

They paused beside a port off the lower corridor.

"So you knew all along?" Cyleen said accusingly.

"The older woman shook her head. "I learned after you'd gone to see Jack Roland. Remember? I talked different after you came back."

"What can we do?" Cyleen wanted to know.

"Honey, I just wish we were men."

The sense of frustration grew. Cyleen could not endure it. She had to talk, ask questions. "Tell me all you know, and I'll tell you all I know," she bargained.

The older woman lowered her voice to a whisper. "There's some sort of intelligence outside the ship or nearby. The men have not seen anything, but a message came over the ultra-wave visicom. There was no image; it may have been some sort of mental projection. But all the men present think they heard it and then read it. It told them what would happen to Beane Skimpton. He was operating the equipment, you know. Then it happened. The men did what they could for poor Beane. It wasn't much. The doctor recommends euthanasia."

"Have they carried it out yet?"

"I don't think so. Anyway, whatever is outside soon knew about it and told them it would provide another victim as fast as they disposed of them. Then it issued an ultimatum."

"What sort of ultimatum?"

"I don't know; I wasn't intentionally eavesdropping. But there's a fault in the ship-structure where the ventilation pipes pass from the lounge to the conference room. I overheard some of the officers talking. I think that outside intelligence demands that we deliver one or more of us outside the ship. They tried to make clear the purpose, but no one can grasp their meaning."

"Does that mean the ship would then be freed?"

"There is no promise, but that's what the officers believe."

"Have the men decided yet?"

"Yes. The men cast lots, all but Holby Gradwell. He demanded to be allowed to go himself. He had it all figured out so the troupe would never

know what happened to him. But the thing outside wants a younger person."

"Tell me. Who's to go?"

Jean Lee put an arm about Cyleen. "Kid, you've got to take this like a trouper. Jack Roland lost; some of the men think he cheated and did it deliberately."

CYLEEN fought back the blackness.

"No," she breathed. "Not Jack! No. He mustn't."

"But kid—"

"No. Jack shan't go. He can't. He mustn't. If they cast lots they've got to include us women. If men take their chances, why shouldn't we?"

"But listen, kid. You're just a baby; you know you couldn't go through with it. And if the other women even find out about it they will go into hysterics. No, Cyleen; it's a man's job, and not a man among them would even consider letting a woman in on it."

"But why not some other man? Not Jack Roland?"

"Now look, kid, you go to your room and I'll bring you a drink."

Cyleen shook the blinding tears out of her eyes. "I'm going to do something," she said.

Jean Lee led her toward the stateroom. "What can a woman do when it comes to something like this? All we can do is cry. God shouldn't have made such a helpless and wailing sex. I'd willingly go myself, but I know I'd faint before I got outside the airlock."

"I won't faint," Cyleen said determinedly.

"Honey, you could go with Jack, and as long as he was there you'd be all right. But you just couldn't go alone; don't you understand?"

"No. I don't understand anything except that I can't sit here and wait for Jack to walk out that airlock."

"Take it easy for a few minutes. Sit quietly. Maybe Jack won't be hurt. I'm going to get you a drink. I won't be but a few minutes; don't dare leave here."

Cyleen waited until the door closed. She had made her decision and the decision itself steadied her nerves, gave her strength.

Moving softly but quickly, she left the room, went toward the spacesuit compartment. She passed the conference-room, glanced in, saw Jack Roland signing something. She allowed her blue eyes to dwell on his profile, his heavy shoulders briefly, then hurried on.

At the entrance to the spacesuit compartment, she halted, caught her breath. The door was ajar. Sounds came from the room. Momentarily she experienced a wave of relief at the thought somebody else, not Jack Roland, was preparing for the task.

Inching forward, she glanced into the room. Her big eyes blinked. Her knees trembled. Inside the room Jean Lee was struggling with a spacesuit. Jean Lee's breath came fast. Cyleen could see the vein standing out on her temple, throbbing, could see that the older woman was working in frantic haste—and accomplishing exactly nothing.

Cyleen went on inside. Jean Lee almost fainted at the sight of her.

"I can't do it," Jean Lee wept. "I just can't; my hands won't stop trembling."

Cyleen took the suit from her, worked into it herself, wishing now that she had slipped out of her dress. Jean Lee stood as though stricken.

"Help me with the helmet," Cyleen ordered.

The shaking hands obeyed. "Honey, I never knew, never dreamed, what it takes to be a man."

Cyleen tried to smile. It turned into a grimace. "Me neither," she said. "I've envied men their privileges. Women are fools; they don't know the responsibilities that go along with those privileges."

"Are you going to be able to make it, Cyleen?"

The blonde girl struggled with the words: "I—I don't know. This thing is so awkward and I feel so weak. Put the helmet on me, and you'll have to help me with the airlock."

Jean Lee glanced out first. No one was in sight. Cyleen followed awkwardly.

"They haven't released the inter-

locking switch in the control room." The words came to Cyleen gratingly, not through her ears, but through the bone behind her ears against which two tiny clamps pressed.

Instantly there followed a restrained cry as though from the pits of torment. The cry was masculine. It sent shivers through Cyleen because it seemed so strange and terrifying to hear a man finally break and express his anguish, an expression that was not human.

The intercom crackled: "Jack Roland! Jack Roland! They've set the time forward. That's the second demonstration; if you're ready, move quickly."

THE green light flashed, signalling the release of the interlock. Cyleen touched Jean Lee's shoulder, gestured. Jean Lee pressed the button, steadied herself against the wall.

The big airlock opened slowly. The intercom crackled. Orders were shouted through the ship. Cyleen moved.

The last thing to impress her before the air chamber closed was the look on Jean Lee's features. It was a look of inhuman terror, but through it came a ray of admiration shining out of the woman's dark eyes.

The chamber closed. Cyleen stood alone. There was no sound, no hint of movement, nothing. She was here alone, cut off from all life in an air chamber. There was no turning back, not another last look at humans as she knew them, no one to hear her sobbing.

She seized the handgrips, held on, fought the pressure as the outer lock opened, kept herself from being snatched out abruptly.

And then she saw the blackness of space beyond the faint shimmering light that was reflected from the ship itself. The pressure had been momentary. There was nothing now; just the beckoning void lighted by all the bright jewels of the cosmos against a background of total dark.

Something sounded. It was the airlock closing again. It was being operated from inside. She had to move quickly. She adjusted the tiny jets,

pressed the stud. She swam out from the ship into blackness.

Terror racing through every fibre, Cyleen fought the stud, swung the guide, came about. The ship was 50 yards off and drifting further.

Then it happened. Cyleen was literally snatched away from the ship. She felt the force about her. She saw nothing but the ship and what was happening there as she receded into the depth of the void. She saw the airlock come open again.

Some indescribable wave of feeling flooded Cyleen. It was a sense of mingled terror and pride and happiness at the sight of another human jetting in her wake. Never in her life had she ever been so thrilled by the sight of another person.

The ship was a tiny dot. The figure of the person in the spacesuit grew. The jet left a vapour trail behind it. Cyleen fired her own jets, but nothing resulted. She watched as the figure swung its jets about to brake. She realised she had stopped moving away from the ship.

And then she saw through the plastic face of the helmet, recognised the man, and suddenly she was no longer afraid. She could die now, or suffer whatever came with good will; she was no longer alone.

"Jack!" She was glad her voice would be distorted slightly by the waves that carried it to him. She did not want the expression of feeling to go through.

"Cyleen!" It was deep and husky and distorted. "Don't use your jets; don't do anything. Just let everything go as it will. I'm working close to you. Have to be careful. Easy to overshoot. Now! Take my hand. Hang on to me."

Cyleen was never happier to obey orders.

"Move closer," Roland ordered. "You can't see it, but I've got a nine-way polarizing field in front of me. Press close and look through it."

Cyleen looked, gasped. Outlined in the cosmos was not a tangible figure, but visible and curving rays of light which were in no way reflected.

"How can we see light when it isn't reflected?" she asked.

"You see what I see?" Roland asked.

"Yes. A great giant of starlight, and behind him other giants. Jack the whole cosmos looks real and solid."

"I think it is, Cyleen; we just haven't perceived it before. They are watching us. We must go to them."

"But what are they going to do to us?"

"I don't want to build up false hope," Roland said, "but I'm hoping we'll come out of this. I've figured on some things. Just trust me, and don't do anything I don't tell you to do."

"I'll always trust you in everything."

THEY approached the starlight beings slowly. At length one of them extended a hand. Great webs of light ran out from it.

"It looks like a fishing net, Jack."

"I think it is," he admitted. "I think they have been fishing for men. See how the net extends out to the ship and around it? No wonder we couldn't get anywhere. They can run in and out at will; I was certain I had it figured right."

Cyleen heard something like static, then a new sound, or it may have been just thought running into her mind: "We have tried long to net one of your ships. We hoped to establish a medium of communication with your kind."

"You've done that," Roland said. "We have fulfilled the terms of your ultimatum. The one with me is my opposite in sex, vital to sustain life among our kind. You will allow her to return to the ship?"

"No!" Cyleen stifled the word. She recalled Roland's warning.

"Yes. She may return."

"Go, Cyleen! Go," Roland ordered "Go quickly!"

"No. I can't. I can't leave you."

"Go, please, quickly. Don't answer again. Go! Please trust me. Don't doubt. Go."

There was a moment that seemed an eternity. Cyleen could no longer make a decision. She had lost all

will to control herself. She was driven by his words; she jetted toward the ship.

It seemed hours. She waited outside the airlock, neither despairing nor boping, a semi-dead thing. She had seen Roland disappear into the arms of one of those beings. Her mind no longer worked. She could not think clearly about anything; even all feeling had died within her.

Then Roland was suddenly beside her, stepping out of the hand of one of those beings.

Time meant nothing. Sometime later she was able to whisper, "Jack, you're wonderful."

"You're sort of great yourself," he said.

Then there was talk, Roland talking: "About like we figured it," he was saying. "They didn't know what pain and death were as we know them; they had no idea they were literally torturing every nerve in Beaney Skimpton's body. Possess none of our senses. Perceive space as material, matter as a rumple in it. One of them figured out a way to bridge between them and us, and they swung a moving net of some sort of force about the ship."

"Beaney's all right now. Shock! He'll be all right."

"Yes. They merely wanted to hold his mind in some sort of field. They don't have nerves, and didn't know what it would do to him."

"You say, they didn't mean us any harm?"

"No," Roland went on. "It seems to be a law of Nature that no creature of any kind will wilfully harm another except out of fear, hunger, greed, or an aberration. Greed may be an aberration in war. Fear may also. But we had it figured right. They don't want to harm us; they do want us to co-operate with them in bridging that gap. And that nine-way polarisation enables us to perceive them by sight, and they've reached us by mental projections, and so the way is wide open."

Cyleen paid little attention to all this. When the opportunity came she repeated, "Jack, you're wonderful."

"So are you," he insisted.

"But no woman can be as wonderful as you," she argued. "When I think about it all—"

"Now wait a minute," he said. "Don't belittle women. It takes every whit as much courage, as much brains, as much of everything, to be a real woman as it does to be a real man."

"But women can't do things like men."

"Hold on!" Roland looked deep into her eyes. "You went out there to save others. It wasn't exactly in your line, but you did the best you could. It was great."

"After all," he added wryly, "I'd make a poor showing trying to compete with you in having a baby."

THE END



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